

# Marx and Aristotle on the Highest Good

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Aristotle claims that the most perfect happiness is a life of contemplation, which is a life as close to the supremely happy lives of the Gods as is possible in human life. This life is more perfectly happy because contemplation, in taking itself as its own object, cannot so easily be deprived of what is necessary for it and thus remains less subject to misfortune. I shall argue that, while there are many affinities between Marx's conception of the highest good and this conception from Aristotle, Marx differs crucially by taking the highest good to be human rather than godlike. For Marx, the counterpart of being removed from the vicissitudes of fortune is the reduction to a minimum of what he terms the sphere of necessity. The highest good is not a life of contemplation but rather the pursuit of ends that human beings individually and collectively choose for themselves independently of the demands of survival and reproduction.

## 1. Introduction

In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle considers three candidates for a life lived well: the life of pleasure or enjoyment; the life of politics; and the life of contemplation. Aristotle does not include a life of exercising technical skill, although showing excellence of technique seems to give much the same sort of reason for regarding as a life lived well as showing excellence in pursuit of the truth. We may note in passing Bostock's (2000:190) claim that Aristotle arbitrarily excludes the idea of excellent professional lives from those lived well. It seems clear, though, that professional lives will be excellent because they show an outstanding grasp of the truth, admirable regard to others, or excellence in technique. So, the substance of Aristotle's exclusion of professional lives from those lived well is that he excludes a life showing excellence in technique. As Bostock suggests, this exclusion can be explained by the limitations of the way of thinking of ancient Greek citizens, who looked down on having to earn one's living, especially by the use of technical skill.

Aristotle (1934:1171a) claims that the "best and most perfect" of human excellences is the life of contemplation, because it is closest to the activity of the Gods and least vulnerable to loss of the conditions on which it depends. By contrast, activity

Aristotle. Roman copy after a Greek bronze original by  
Lysippos from 330 BC

governed by practical reason aims at what is just and other outcomes that benefit others, such as courage in battle or generous gifts. Such actions depend on the occasion: one cannot act justly, courageously or generously if no one needs a fair share of goods, an enemy defeated, or a vital need met. Because a virtuous life governed by practical reason requires other persons as its object it is more vulnerable than a life of contemplation, which can be carried on independently of external conditions to a greater degree.

In this paper, I shall argue that Marx's implicit conception of the best life for human beings argues for a more down to earth conception of the good life than Aristotle's. He does this by shifting the basis or ground of a good life from virtue to freedom and replacing contemplation as the most complete form of human virtue with "distinctively human" freedom as the most complete form of human freedom.

This enables Marx's conception of a life lived well to escape the difficulties of the idea that a life lived well is closest to the life of the Gods. Thus a life lived well for Marx is a life lived freely and the best life will be one expressing the highest or most distinctively human forms of freedom. For Marx, the counterpart of being removed from the vicissitudes of fortune is the reduction to a minimum of what he terms the sphere of necessity. As we will see later, the highest good is not a life of contemplation but rather the development of human powers for its own sake through the free

pursuit of ends that human beings individually and collectively choose for themselves, independently of naturally given demands of survival and reproduction.

## 2. Aristotle's Happy Lives

Aristotle introduces the idea of a life lived well by saying that it is what everyone aims for in life. After discussing in general terms what a good life amounts to — it must be an activity, most pleasant, chosen for its own sake, inclusive of all things chosen for their own sake, and so on — Aristotle (1934:1098a) suggests that we can get beyond platitudes by comparing a good life with performing one's role well. A good shoemaker makes shoes well and a good flautist plays the flute well. So, Aristotle suggests, a good person, or a person who lives well, will do well in expressing in their actions the distinguishing feature of persons.<sup>1</sup>

Aristotle claims that practical or theoretical thinking in accordance with reason is the distinguishing feature of persons. Aristotle equates this with a life in accordance with virtue. Aristotle then claims that happiness is really a life led in accordance with the best or most final virtue: "if happiness consists in activity in accordance with virtue, it is reasonable that it should be activity in accordance with the highest virtue; and this will be the virtue of the best part of us" (Aristotle, 1934:1177, 12–15). Aristotle concludes that happiness consists in contemplation, which is to say that it is thinking displaying theoretical wisdom, and offers some pretty bad arguments in favour of this rather strange view. Bostock (2000:200–201) rightly observes how unattractive this view of happiness seems.

Aristotle (1934:1177b) lists some signs that contemplation is "perfect virtue": it is potentially the most continuous of excellent activities; it is "admittedly" the most pleasant — or at least "contains pleasures of marvellous purity and permanence"; it will also be most highly "self-sufficient", since it is more solitary than political activities that depend on how others fare for their intended effect.

Be this as it may, it is not clear why these features of contemplation should be important to its contribution to happiness. Aristotle seems taken here with a worry — later developed in Stoic and Epicurian philosophies<sup>2</sup> — that to aim for goods that can be more easily taken away is misguided. From such a standpoint, it is better to set one's sights low or on internal goods, as simple pleasures or pleasures of the intellect are less capable of being taken, and therefore more choice-worthy than more intensely pleasurable but more vulnerable commitments. However, as Aristotle (1934:1100b30–34) himself suggests, the idea that a happy life should be less causally

<sup>1</sup> Bostock (2000:16–17) explains how this conception fits in with Aristotle's overall view of how the world works. If we do indeed determine the function of our parts by what they contribute to a distinctively human life, as Bostock suggests we determine what eyes are for, then this would be an advantage of taking Aristotle's view.

<sup>2</sup> Martha Nussbaum (1994:190–191) explains the hope of these philosophies to insulate life from human terrors in *The Therapy of Desire*.

subject to setbacks is not the only way of seeing it as less vulnerable to misfortune. It could be seen that way primarily because a happy person can endure “repeated and severe misfortune with patience, not owing to insensibility but to greatness of soul”.

Aristotle (1934:1100b15–20) similarly supposes that happiness must consist of activities that are “more lasting” and “most fully and continuously occupy the lives of the supremely happy”, since to have “the greatest and noblest of all things... left to fortune would be contrary to the fitness of things” (Aristotle, 1934:1099b25). The happiness of the Gods may provide a consoling vision of a happiness proof against the threats to which human happiness is subject. However, human lives must seek out human goods, which by their nature can always be snatched away through wrongs or misfortune. Aristotle provides no good reason to think otherwise, or for thinking that the courage to face the risks of human life (fortitude) is not itself a virtue and a constituent part of happiness.

Aristotle (1934:1097b10–20) suggests that the “self-sufficiency” he is after is not a solitary life but simply the absence of serious shortcomings in one’s happiness. A rational version of self-sufficient happiness like this might be a degree of happiness so complete that there would be no point to seeking some additional good in order to be happy, since one is already happy enough. Life goes sufficiently well for happy people for their happiness not to turn on better or worse fortune (Crisp, 1999:226). We could say that, while both may be happy, the fortunate are especially blessed, while the unlucky are not (Lawrence, 1999:187–191).

For Aristotle, a further recommendation of contemplation is that it involves leisure, while the activities of a political life are “unleisurely”. By “leisurely” Aristotle does not mean merely “idle” or lacking in effort. His intention is partly to contrast it with activities that are driven by natural necessity, such as the practical arts, whose end is bodily survival. However, “leisurely” must mean more than chosen without regard to natural necessity, since political life is also not always driven by natural necessity. Aristotle (1934:1177b10–15) seems to imply that political life is not “leisurely” because it is not carefree. However, it is not clear that the best life must be carefree.

Aristotle has a further point of distinction between the political and contemplative lives: political activities are carried on for some end other than themselves: one does not justly resolve conflicts for their own sake only, as we would prefer to have fewer conflicts to resolve. We engage in political activity not just for its own sake but also for the happiness that it will bring to others. Aristotle claims that contemplation is engaged in for its own sake only.

Aristotle (eg. 1934:1097b1–10; 1177b) claims a number of times that we seek happiness for its own sake only. This, however, seems false: while I no doubt seek my own happiness for its own sake, I could quite easily also want to be happy because this contributes to the happiness of my friends and lovers, just as their happiness will contribute to mine. Aristotle might respond that my happiness consists not only of what is good for me but also what is good for my family, friends and community. So

my happiness is not a means to but consists in part of the happiness of others. Nevertheless, even if my own happiness includes the happiness of others, it will still not be merely desirable for its own sake but also may be desirable as a means to civic peace.

In any case, if an activity cannot constitute happiness unless it is engaged in only for its own sake, this would also rule out contemplation, as not even it is engaged in only for its own sake. We often contemplate the truth in order to have better control over our lives. Although Aristotle (1981:1216b10–16) dismisses the idea that knowledge of geometry could be useful, except accidentally, the intrinsic purpose of modern science clearly includes better control over natural processes. Better control of natural processes is as much a part of the intrinsic aim of modern science as the welfare of citizens is part of the intrinsic aim of politics.

Nor is it clear that contemplation is the most desirable good, as Plato assumes it must be, when he argues against taking

Karl Marx (1818–1883)

pleasure as the highest good, because it can always be combined with other goods to yield a good that is more desired than pleasure on its own (Aristotle, 1934:1097b15–20; 1172b28–34). The exercise of theoretical wisdom combined with practical wisdom seems more desirable for human beings than the exercise of theoretical wisdom on its own. As Bostock (2000:202–3) argues, a life consisting only of the exercise of theoretical wisdom is not a plausible candidate even for a good life, let alone the most perfect life.

Kraut (1989:309, 53–7) suggests that practical wisdom and other virtues should be seen as indispensable conditions of contemplation. A life without them is less desirable than one with them but this is because they are essential conditions of a human life of contemplation. Gods can be happy by contemplation alone but human beings cannot. If they are to contemplate, they must also live well enough with others to be untroubled in their reflection on scientific truths.

However, I think a more thoroughgoing change of orientation is required for a plausible account of human happiness. If the assumptions that happiness is peculiarly “final” and causally proof against misfortune are discarded, little remains to bolster

the view that contemplation is the most perfect among many virtues. I have already noted that there is no reason to suppose that happiness must be the least causally subject to misfortune, given that it is proof to a degree against misfortune due to the fortitude that accompanies it. Nor can I see any good reason for supposing that happiness must be peculiarly final in the sense that it is sought for its own sake only and not for any other end.

Aristotle has given no good reason to accept his assumption that, if there are many virtues of the soul, happiness must be the most perfect or most peculiarly final of them. In Book I, Aristotle (1934:1098a14–19) states, almost as an aside, that “if there be several human excellences or virtues”, then happiness should be identified with “the best and most perfect among them”.<sup>3</sup> That happiness should be identified with the practice of the best among the human excellences seems reasonable, but Aristotle adds that it should be *teliotaton*, which seems to imply that happiness must be nothing but a final end without qualification: ie purely final. This seems to import the Platonic idea that things will be best when they most purely exemplify what they are.<sup>4</sup>

Aristotle’s own view that one acts best when one aims at the “mean” calls this idea into question. In one sense, acting fearlessly in any circumstance most purely exemplifies being fearless. However, as Aristotle (1934:1117a20–25) points out, a courageous person does not act fearlessly in all circumstances, since in some cases that could well be rash. The most purely fearless act, in the sense of being similar to nothing but fearless acts, is not the best way to be fearless: in some circumstances, to act courageously will be hard to discern from acting like a coward. As Aristotle (1934:1109a1–10) notes, it is the similarity between rashness and courage that leads us to call cowardice its opposite, although rashness is also its opposite. Similarly, if happiness is the end of life it does not follow that it must be nothing but an end of life. Without this, and the previous assumptions I have questioned as baseless, Aristotle’s case for taking happiness as a life of contemplation collapses. While one could try to make the most of Aristotle’s view, if it is as baseless as I have claimed, another approach to the best life suggests itself.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> In Book X, Aristotle (1934:1177a12–14) shifts his position somewhat, claiming that “if happiness consists in activity in accordance with virtue, it is reasonable that it should be activity in accordance with the highest virtue, and this will be the virtue of the best part of us”. This also has some plausibility but does not license Aristotle’s further view that, for various reasons, including that it is closest to the Gods, contemplation is the best part of us.

<sup>4</sup> There are other views as to why Aristotle goes wrong here, including that he plays on the ambiguity of *teleon*.

<sup>5</sup> Kenny (1992:93–6) takes this view also by suggesting that Aristotle has two versions of the good life. He argues that we should reject the “intellectualist” version and adopt instead the view that a good life includes all of the virtues, while the best life includes the most perfect virtues. I propose a more thoroughgoing rejection of the idea that the good life is contemplation.

### 3. Marx and the Best Human Life

That Marx has an implicit idea of the best form of human life is undisputed: his critique of alienation under capitalism and previous forms of society is after all a critique of ways of living that are dehumanised and thus incapable of realising what is best in human life. Marx's conception of the best form of human life is clearly influenced by Aristotle's. While Aristotle identifies a good life with the fullest expression of distinctively human reason, Marx (1976:959; cf 1973:706) identifies it with the fullest scope for the exercise of distinctively human freedom, which in turn he takes as the most extensive scope for the exercise of "human powers [which have been developed] as an end in itself":

[The] realm of natural necessity expands with his development, because his needs do too; but the productive forces to satisfy these expand at the same time. Freedom, in this sphere, can consist only in this, that socialized man, the associated producers, govern the human metabolism with nature in a rational way, bring it under their collective control instead of being dominated by it as a blind power; accomplishing it with the least expenditure of energy and in conditions most worthy and appropriate for their human nature. But this always remains a realm of necessity. The true realm of freedom, the development of human powers as an end in itself, begins beyond it, though it can only flourish with this realm of necessity as its basis. The reduction of the working day is the basic prerequisite.

The counterpart of happiness as the expression of virtue is the expression of human powers. The exercise of the fullest development of human powers as an end in itself on the basis of a reduction of the working day to a minimum corresponds with Aristotle's singling out of contemplation as the "leisurely" exercise of complete or perfect virtue. Technical excellence is included as a central component of the full development of human powers rather than arbitrarily excluded from the scope of distinctively human excellences. However, Marx recognizes the element of truth in Aristotle's exclusion of technical excellence: the labour of slaves, or any other forced form of social cooperation in production, is the reverse of an expression of human excellence: only when social cooperation is free rational cooperation, can technical excellence appear as a general virtue rather than as the preserve of professions.

Marx takes the shift from the expression of virtue to the expression of freedom as the substance of happiness from Hegel. For Hegel, freedom in its most developed form is a capacity to pursue happiness in accordance with virtue. Hegel (1991:§§14–21) begins his account of the most developed form of freedom by rejecting Kant's absolute division between "natural freedom" (being able to act from one's desires) and "practical freedom", which is the power to know what is right and the capacity to choose in accordance with that knowledge.<sup>6</sup> Hegel distinguishes three forms of

<sup>6</sup> Kant uses the Latin terms *arbitrium liberum* and *arbitrium brutum* for the distinction.



freedom: immediate or natural freedom (corresponding with Kant's natural freedom); reflective freedom; and rational freedom (corresponding with Kant's autonomy).

Hegel (1991:§20, §21) characteristically recognizes reflective freedom as a form of freedom intermediate between natural and rational freedom, into which enters an element of reason required for deliberation on ends with a view to happiness. In a life of reflective freedom, we exercise a capacity to stand back from any desire or inclination whatever and select which of them to follow as part of an overall plan of life in pursuit of happiness (Hegel, 1991:§17, §20). Hegel considers that the idea of reflective or "arbitrary" freedom captures the way freedom is usually understood. Nevertheless, reflective freedom is limited inasmuch as it takes desires and inclinations as givens of our nature and upbrings, even though we may selectively act upon them.

Rational freedom goes further toward self-determination. For Hegel, the *Bildung*, or formation, of a person whose actions embody rational or absolute freedom, requires subjection of desire to rational ethical considerations: "...liberation is the *hard work* of opposing mere subjectivity of conduct, of opposing the immediacy of desire as well as the subjective vanity of feeling and arbitrariness of caprice" (Hegel, 1991:§187).

Hegel claims that full, rational freedom encapsulates both personal or subjective freedom and what he terms objective freedom. He takes objective freedom to be a capacity to transcend inclinations and desires to act for the right reasons in the right circumstances — to grasp and to act on what is "universal" — which necessarily goes beyond mere reflective deliberation on our desires in the pursuit of happiness (Patten, 1999:48–51; cf. Aristotle, 1934:1115b17–21). Hegel thus attempts, along Aristotelian lines, to articulate a more fully developed concept of happiness as the realization of rational freedom, taken as the unity of subjective and objective freedom.

Wood (1990:70) suggests that Hegel's concept of the life of absolute freedom or rational self-determination is nothing but the "truth", or full realization, of happiness: that is, happiness informed by reason as ethical precept. Wood claims that Hegel's rational free life goes beyond happiness in the narrow sense of the coherent satisfaction of desire by integrating it also with non-self-interested, other regarding desires into a coherent reasoned whole. Only by being included within the scope of rational freedom can happiness achieve its complete, self-sufficient form, or become "true" happiness (Hegel, 1991:§15).

The ethical precepts (*Recht*) by which one's pursuit of satisfaction of desire is led include: a demand for respect of the universal rights of persons, taken as equal to those one would make for oneself; the claims of conscience; and the requirements of living together with others within the spheres of the family, civil society, and the state ("ethical life"). In the sphere of the family, individuals pursue their own happiness along with and through the happiness of others, with whom they are intimately connected by bonds of love. Individuals indirectly serve the interests of others within



the sphere of civil society by pursuing their own interests within the marketplace and professional associations. The state, as Patten (1999:192) argues, is the sphere of other-regarding dispositions and virtues, in which individuals consciously cooperate with others to pursue the interests of all citizens of the state under ethical precepts. This is not to be confused with the state in the narrow sense, as an institution for the exercise of lethal force, for which Hegel's term is "*Notstaat*".

Completed by the state, free activity within the basic institutions of society may be self-sustaining: "[Hegel's] concern is to identify what features of the modern social world make a spirit of independent personality and subjectivity realizable in a stable and self-sustaining way" (Patten, 1999:182). Property and contract are necessary for personality but in themselves prompt violations of rights. These violations may be checked by the threat of retribution and the subjective moral conscience of individuals, but punishment may be unreliable and conscience subject to temptation. Only within ethical life, which provides sustaining customs and coercive institutions that develop the attitudes and habits of mutual respect for persons, can a free life be stable, secure and self-affirming.

Hegel follows Aristotle in taking the ultimate form of happiness to be closer to that of the Gods than ordinary human happiness. From a materialist standpoint, however, happiness can hardly be seen in the same way. When human beings are regarded in a thoroughgoing way as natural beings, it is not plausible to claim that happiness is completed by a faculty of thought that brings us closer to the Gods, or by comprehending oneself as a self-conscious incarnation of Absolute Spirit: "to stand with... subjective freedom not in the particular and contingent situation, but in what has being in and for itself" (Hegel, 1991:22). For a materialist like Marx, reason cannot be the "rose in the cross of the present", as it is for Hegel.

Marx regards Hegel's particular conception of concrete freedom as a mystification of the exceptional creative element in human reasoning, and of the cumulative effects produced by the exercise of this creativity in human culture over generations. However, Marx does not simply reject Hegel's concept of rational freedom in favour of Hegel's idea of reflective freedom. Marx also thinks that distinctively human freedom cannot be based on desires taken as givens. In the realm of true freedom, initially given desires are reformed through the creation of collective life (*Bildung*). Freedom for Marx (1975–1982, Ch. 2) is individual freedom within free collective life: "an association in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all".

Marx thus retains the idea that happiness is more than the achievement in life of a way of integrating into a coherent whole desires that are grounded in immediate nature. Rather, happiness is the achievement in life of a coherent, stable and self-affirming integration of desires grounded in nature with non-self-interested, other regarding desires. This process of integration into a coherent whole transforms both natural and other regarding desires. For Marx as well as for Hegel, collective customs and coercive institutions support this by developing attitudes and habits of mutual

respect for persons. Marx's materialist interpretation of freedom sees it as involving a capacity to pursue individual interests within effective structures for just social cooperation. Marx's idea of freedom is thus very close to Rawls's idea of the two moral powers of having the capacity to act by a sense of justice and the capacity "to form, to revise, and to pursue a conception of the good, and to deliberate in accordance with it" (Rawls, 2005:72).

Marx also follows Hegel and Kant in viewing human freedom as distinctive in the degree to which it enables human beings to pursue ends independently of natural drives. However, Marx construes freedom as a creative capacity that expresses itself initially in new ways of interaction with nature (Marx, 1973:611). The development of our interaction with nature through technology and science in turn diminishes the degree to which the struggle for existence dominates human life and thus provides scope for the expression and development of human powers as an end in itself through human cultural creation, initially typified in art, religion, and philosophy. The ends of human cultural creation are pursued for their own sake, but not for their own sake only. Human freedom, in this sense, comes to provide a space for new activities whose object has been determined by humans themselves independently of naturally given drives, and thus gives a materialist interpretation to the idea that freedom properly begins only in action whose ends are not dictated by nature (Marx, 1981:959). Human beings set their own ultimate ends also by including the development of freedom itself, or their capacities for the collective pursuit of their interests, among those ends. For Marx, the highest good in a good life involves the exercise in practice of distinctively human freedom in this sense.

## 4. Conclusion

Marx's idea of the highest good is a life that realizes in practice distinctively human freedom. This in turn is understood as a capacity to frame, revise and pursue a conception of the good, which integrates self-regarding with other regarding desires under an effective conception of justice. This idea of the highest good has affinities with the inclusive sense of the "highest good" that Kenny attributes to Aristotle, but, happily, is much more remote from the idea of the "highest good" as a life lived as close as possible to that of the Gods.

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